

Exclusive Lifestyle Health & wellness Disability

State seizes control of supported care homes over abuse, 'uninhabitable conditions'

By [Jewel Topsfield](#) and [Royce Millar](#)

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The Victorian government has seized control of two supported care homes in Melbourne's outer north-west after an investigation revealed coercion and abuse of residents, uninhabitable living conditions, forgery of signatures and access to NDIS services being hindered.

Sydenham Grace and Gracemanor (formerly Meadowbrook) supported residential services in Sydenham and Melton South, which house people with mental illness and disabilities, have been placed into administration.



Manager of Sydenham Grace and Gracemanor homes Parvinder Kaur says there is no evidence to back the allegations. EDDIE JIM

Their 34 residents will now be cared for by [Wintringham](#), a specialist aged care provider for the homeless, which took over the facilities with administrator Ernst and Young on Wednesday.

The Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing said in a statement the investigation also found insufficient quality and quantity of food, falsification of records,

private mail being opened, bullying and intimidation, insufficient staffing and obstruction of communication between residents and their guardians.

“The investigation identified the operator was not meeting the stringent regulations in place to protect the interests, health and wellbeing of 34 residents of the two facilities,” the department statement said.

Government seizure of the two facilities followed an [investigation by *The Age*](#) last year which revealed they were caught up in an ugly turf war with rival disability providers over the right to access residents’ lucrative NDIS funding packages, with allegations of abuse and residents being moved in the middle of the night.

[The Age investigation](#) highlighted widespread problems and poor living conditions across the state-regulated but privately run supported residential services sector.

Manager of the two homes Parvinder Kaur is also the co-owner of Grace Disability Services, which provides NDIS-funded support to people with disabilities. She accused the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing of citing claims made by a former, aggrieved employee without providing evidence of mismanagement or wrongdoing.

Ms Kaur denied her facilities were unhygienic and uninhabitable. “Cleaners were coming every day and there was not a single COVID-19 case over the last two years at either facility – and Melton was a COVID hotspot.”

“Is that not proof that the facilities are maintaining hygiene?”

Gracemanor (formerly Meadowbrook) in Melton South. PAUL JEFFERS

Ms Kaur also denied her facilities had hindered access by NDIS and other health services, noting NDIS officers had visited without proper notice at the height of COVID-19 crisis.

She said there was no evidence to back allegations of forgery or falsification of documents. “If the department has proof I would like to see it.”

Ms Kaur also accused the department of racism against supported residential services providers of Indian and Sri Lankan backgrounds. “Officers are racist. I am very sure about that,” she said.

Opposition NDIS spokesman Bill Shorten said NDIS Minister Linda Reynolds must urgently address how an NDIS provider could keep operating despite reports of gross mismanagement.

“Any provider who has been found to have abused its registration in the NDIS must be removed,” Mr Shorten said.

“As usual, a state government has stepped in when the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission has been missing in action.”

Mr Shorten said the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission must explain what action had been taken against Grace Disability Services and why it continued to operate without repercussions.

“The potential for conflicts of interest have been raised as an issue a long time ago. I’m staggered the Morrison government has done nothing to address the problem.”

A spokesperson for Senator Reynolds said the safety and wellbeing of NDIS participants was of the utmost importance and anyone with concerns about an NDIS provider should raise them directly with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission.

A spokesperson for the commission said it was aware of the matters and was investigating. “As there is still an active investigation underway, the NDIS commission is unable to comment further,” the spokesperson said.

More than 4000 of Victoria’s most marginalised citizens live in 116 supported residential settings across the state.

In September 2020, the Victorian government placed another notorious supported residential facility – Hambleton House in Albert Park – into administration after a COVID-19 outbreak revealed shocking conditions, including uncapped needles, mattresses stained with bodily fluids, broken windows and spoiled food.

Last year [The Age revealed](#) the government had been repeatedly warned over years about conditions at Hambleton House.

The introduction of the NDIS has complicated matters in the sector. With annual funding packages that can be worth more than \$100,000, the scheme has turned some of Victoria’s vulnerable citizens into valuable commodities.

Watchdog agencies, health professionals and families are concerned that in the broader industry the NDIS has led to the potential for conflicts of interest, rorting and exploitation in supported residential services.

The Victorian Public Advocate, Colleen Pearce, has previously called for systemic change to supported residential services, saying the state government had failed to act on Hambleton House until the COVID-19 outbreak, despite her office raising concerns about the home for three years.

On Wednesday, acting secretary of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Ben Rimmer said appointing administrators to Sydenham Grace and Gracemanor was “a very significant action” by the Human Services Regulator to protect residents living in the two facilities.

Hambleton House in Albert Park was closed after a COVID-19 outbreak. JASON SOUTH

“The regulator has moved with absolute determination to protect the welfare of residents,” Mr Rimmer said.

The Human Services Regulator was continuing to investigate and working with the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, the National Disability Insurance Agency and Public Advocate.

Last year, the regulator conducted 158 inspections and issued 110 compliance notices to 24 supported residential services.

Mental Health Legal Service CEO Charlotte Jones said she was delighted for the residents of Sydenham Grace and Gracemanor.

“We’ve tried to highlight our concerns around them being financially exploited and physically exploited for that financial gain, which ensured that they couldn’t actually in any way move on with their life,” Ms Jones said.

She hoped the state government’s intervention would put other supported residential services on notice.

Ms Jones also called on the federal government to address the conflict of interest that occurred when a disability accommodation landlord could also be an NDIS provider.

“We think that not only reviewing that conflict of interest, but ensuring it cannot happen is paramount.”

Dr Liz Dearn, a social researcher who has recently completed a PhD at RMIT University on supported residential services and the NDIS, said there were concerns about the potential for exploitation of residents in these settings.

“The lack of transparency and monitoring in the NDIS context gives rise to risk,” Dr Dearn said.

“We are yet to discover how widespread this problem is. But all evidence we have to date suggests that it is a very serious concern.”

In September, local Melton MP Steve McGhie called for Gracemanor (formerly Meadowbrook) to [clean up its act or close](#).

He told *The Age* that in his three years in State Parliament he had heard various complaints about health and welfare issues at the Melton South facility.

“I don’t believe this facility meets appropriate standards for housing these residents,” Mr McGhie said. “It should be brought up to standard and if it can’t be, it should be closed.”

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Jewel Topsfield is social affairs editor at The Age. She has worked in Melbourne, Canberra and Jakarta as Indonesia correspondent. She has won multiple awards including a Walkley and the Lowy Institute Media Award. Connect via [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).



Royce Millar is an investigative journalist at The Age with a special interest in public policy and government decision-making. Connect via [email](#).
